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Mountain Impasse

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Mountains are not only preserves of rare animal and plant species. Very often, rugged terrain helps distinct cultural communities preserve their different ways long after their lowland cousins have lost them. Such mountain survivals can be found all over Europe from the Caucasus to the Scottish Highlands, even in the well-groomed Alps, but nowhere are they thicker on the ground than in that crazy quilt of topography known as the Balkans.

Customs and languages may find refuges in mountains, and so may chaotic, nigh-on insoluble "ethnic" conflicts: Nagorno-Karabakh, the Basque country, Chechnya and Kashmir spring to mind. In hilly Kosovo, communal conflicts only reached the stage of organized violence a half-generation ago, but that's no reason to think political instability won't outlive the current activity marked by infighting among governing factions, an upstart Serb "parliament," and the great powers' stuttering attempts to find a resolution.

Not to mention today's conference in Brussels where donors are expected to parcel out a rather modest 1.4 billion euros in development aid. Political instability in the fractured landscape of the Western Balkans has a long history. The nature of the land fostered the survival of isolated communities and hindered the Slavic tribes from ever forming a unified state in the medieval period, the distinguished historian John V. A. Fine Jr. has argued. Under Ottoman rule, in many cases it was the most isolated peoples – always a thorn in the side of Christian rulers and missionaries – who adapted best to the Ottomans' comparatively permissive governance. Sometimes they converted to Islam, but not always: the persistence of Roman Catholicism in northern Albania is a case in point. In World War II, the anti-Nazi Partisans ensconced themselves in the hills.

Unfortunately, in recent years Kosovo became notorious for intolerance of minorities, even as the label of majority shifted from Serbs to Albanians. Tens of thousands of Serbs and Roma fled or were forced out of the province in 1999 as many more Albanians returned from temporary exile in safer parts of Kosovo, Macedonia or Albania. The Albanians who had fled Serbian troops and paramilitary gangs managed to come home within months, thanks to Serbia's crumpling under U.S. and British bombing raids. Nine years later, the new "minorities," most of whom went to Serbia, are losing heart over the Kosovar authorities' lukewarm efforts to restore their former

homes, farms and businesses. Foreign troops often have been and continue to form the last line of defense for Serbs' houses and churches.

SHAME OF THE NEW NATION

Justice is not colorblind in today's Kosovo. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has found serious procedural flaws throughout the Kosovar justice system in its new report on the official response to the 2004 violence that led to 19 deaths and the destruction of much Serb-owned property. The report charges that "the courts widely failed to account for ethnic motive as an aggravating factor in cases related to the March 2004 riots," and blames the Kosovar authorities for the small number of prosecutions. A security analysis in 2006 by the Kosovar-run, Western-funded Kosovo Institute for Policy Research and Development asserted, "Kosovo remains a divided society with little interaction between the majority Albanian and minority Serb communities," largely a legacy of Serbs' feelings of insecurity.

One of the Pristina government's greatest challenges is to restore a measure of faith in its ability to enforce equality before the law. A good place to start is the problem of illegally occupied property. Major reasons for the return of only 12,000 displaced Serbs to Kosovo between 2000 and 2004 include "unresolved property issues, rule of law, security and a lack of economic opportunities," the Kosovar security analysts found. The Roma meanwhile face "long-term xenophobic exclusion related to allegations of atrocities committed alongside Serb forces during the war."

With the welter of international organizations active in Kosovo, there is no shortage of "conflict resolution" experts. Unfortunately, the international community is itself riven by disputes over Kosovo, and its institutions all have major trust problems among Kosovars.

INSTITUTIONALIZED IMPOTENCE

Neither Albanians nor Serbs put much faith in the EU, seen as far less effective than the UN or NATO missions. This may be unfair, given that the EU's institutions can never hope to achieve the efficiency of a hierarchical security organization like NATO. In any case, Brussels' track record in ensuring minority protection on the ground in new member states, not just in accession treaties, has been spotty at best.

As for the UN administration that has tried to bring a measure of good governance to the province since 1999, it's in limbo at the moment with no one quite sure if the slimmed-down UN presence will be subordinate to the new EU justice mission, which in any case looks likely to be delayed.

The OSCE, however, has acquired a lot of practice in ethnic conflict situations, primarily through its national minorities commissioner, an office established in 1992

as fears mounted over the communal violence then spreading through the Yugoslav republics. The office's mandate prescribes confidentiality in dealings with governments and minority organizations, so it's difficult to know much about its working methods. The three diplomats who have filled the post so far have kept well out of the media fray, a testament to their mastery of what's been dubbed quiet diplomacy. Analysts, however, often cite the office's good work in dragging reluctant majorities and minorities to the negotiating table in such countries as Latvia, Estonia, and Slovakia.

Another advantage is that the commissioner's mandate allows him to make unannounced visits. The current commissioner is Knut Vollebaek, a Norwegian diplomat with experience in former Yugoslavia. It might not be a bad idea for him to abandon the quiet diplomacy for once and make a well-publicized tour of Serb enclaves in Kosovo – perhaps taking in one of the Macedonian settlements for displaced Kosovar Roma – and then start gently banging heads together in Pristina.

Many times in history conquerors moving into rugged, hard-to-manage territory, whether they be the Ottomans in the Balkan mountains or the British on the Indian Northwest Frontier, have learned a measure of tolerance for mountain peoples' eccentricities. Should he go to Pristina, Vollebaek might point this out to his hosts. It's worth a try, and soon, for in the mountains foul weather comes early and often.